

Mussolini, Benito

{moos-soh-lee'-nee, bay-nee'-toh}

Benito Mussolini, b. July 29, 1883, d. Apr. 28, 1945, was the founder of Italian FASCISM and premier (1922-43) of Italy, ruling as a dictator from about 1925. The son of an anticlerical, socialist blacksmith, he was undisciplined and unruly as a child. He shared his father's views, adding to them ideas picked up from his wide reading of such writers as Louis Auguste BLANQUI, Friedrich Wilhelm NIETZSCHE, and Georges SOREL. Mussolini became an itinerant schoolteacher and journalist, spent a few years in Switzerland and the Austrian Trentino, and took as his wife a peasant, Rachele Guidi, who bore him five children.

In 1912, Mussolini became editor of the Milan Socialist party newspaper *Avanti!* When World War I began in 1914, he at first opposed Italy's involvement but soon reversed his position and called for Italy's entry on the side of the Allies. Expelled from the Socialist party for this stance, he founded his own newspaper in Milan, *Il popolo d'Italia*, which later became the organ of his Fascist movement. He served in the army until he was wounded in 1917.

On Mar. 23, 1919, Mussolini and other war veterans founded in Milan a revolutionary, nationalistic group called the *Fasci di Combattimento*, named for the ancient Roman symbol of power, the *FASCES*. His Fascist movement developed into a powerful "radicalism of the right," gaining the support of many landowners in the lower Po valley, industrialists, and army officers. Fascist blackshirt squads carried on local civil war against Socialists, Communists, Catholics, and Liberals.

On Oct. 28, 1922, after the Fascists had marched on Rome, Mussolini secured a mandate from King VICTOR EMMANUEL III to form a coalition government. In 1925-26, after a lengthy crisis with the parliament following the assassination of the Socialist leader Giacomo Matteotti (see MATTEOTTI CRISIS), he imposed a single-party, totalitarian dictatorship. His *Corporative State* came to terms with Italian capitalism but abolished free trade unions. He ended conflict with the church by the LATERAN TREATY of 1929, his most enduring legacy to Italy.

In the mid-1930s, Mussolini turned to an aggressive foreign policy, conquering (1935-36) Ethiopia and helping General Francisco FRANCO in the SPANISH CIVIL WAR. Rapprochement (1936) with Hitler's Germany was expanded into a military alliance (1939). In April 1939, Mussolini rashly ordered his armies to occupy Albania. However, he kept Italy out of World War II until June 1940, when the fall of France was imminent and the Germans seemed to be winning the war.

After a series of Italian military disasters in Greece and North Africa, the leaders of his party abandoned Mussolini. The king dismissed him on July 25, 1943, and had him arrested. But on September 12 the Germans rescued him, making him puppet head of a government in northern Italy. In April 1945, Mussolini and his mistress, Clara Petacci, tried to flee advancing Allied forces. Captured by Italian partisans at Lake Como, they were shot on April 28 and their bodies were hung in a public square in Milan. Mussolini was later buried at Predappio, his birthplace. Although popular with most Italians until the late 1930s, *Il Duce* ("the leader") lost their support when he dragged his country into a war it was unprepared to fight. Few expressed regret over either the overthrow of fascism or his death. Many of Mussolini's speeches and writings, including an autobiography (1939), are available in English.

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Bibliography: Collier, Richard, *Duce!* (1971); Fermi, Laura, *Mussolini* (1961); Gallo, Max, *Mussolini's Italy* (1973); Kirkpatrick, Ivone, *Mussolini, A Study in Power* (1964); Knox, M., *Mussolini Unleashed* (1982; repr. 1986); Megaro, Gaudens, *Mussolini in the Making* (1938; repr. 1967); Monelli, Paolo, *Mussolini: An Intimate Life*, trans. by Brigid Maxwell (1953); Smith, Denis M., *Mussolini* (1983).